

LISTENING FOR JESUS' CALL ON YOUR LIFE

Theme: God places a heart call on each of our lives to fulfill the purpose for which we were created.

Texts: Varied: I Cor. 9:16, 17; Jer. 20:9; Ex. 3:11; John 15:11

Special: Commissioning of Nehemiah Ministers

Lloyd Ogilvie, former Chaplain of the U. S. Senate and well known Presbyterian pastor, asks one of the most arresting and provocative questions that I have ever had to ponder. He inquires, *"What difference would it make if you knew the purpose for which you were created?"* Let's allow that question to sink in. Suppose I had the power to set up an appointment following worship for each of you to have a one on one with God. In this appointment God would speak to you about his purpose for your life. He would say something like: "Greg, this is my purpose for you to fulfill during your days on this planet before you stand before me."

As you anticipated this intimate moment of revelation, how might you feel? Would you rush to this opportunity with a racing heart in eager anticipation that finally a veil would be removed? *"I want to know what I am to be about this this life!"* Or would this excitement be tainted with the caution of fear? Might this fear even cause us to not want to keep the appointment? Why might we be afraid? There is a fear of commitment. The more I know, the more I am responsible. I can't hide any longer behind a vagueness about my purpose that lets me off the hook.

"What difference would it make if you knew the purpose for which you were created?" In spite of the mixture of anticipation and fear, my guess is that very few of us would miss the appointed time and place that had been set for us to receive with clarity God's purpose for our life.

This is the way Os Guinness puts the hunger for God's purpose in his book, The Call. *"Deep in our hearts, we all want to find and fulfill a purpose bigger than ourselves. Only such a larger purpose can inspire us to heights we know we could never reach on our own. For each of us the real purpose is personal and passionate: to know what we are here to do, and why. Kierkegaard (the Danish philosopher) wrote in his journal: "The thing is to understand myself, to see what God really wants me to do; the thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die."*

Our subject this morning is "Listening for Jesus' Call Upon Your Life". Has it occurred to you that God has a particular purpose or call upon your life? You will note that I am using the term purpose and call here interchangeably. For

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many of us this morning it may be a new thought that God has a particular purpose for your life that you can actually know.

Why might this be a new thought? The main reason, I believe, that we might not think of ourselves as having a call is that call is so associated with those who are pastors and missionaries. Call is reserved for a select few who have a "special" calling into the sacred realm of the church. We even have code language that links the special calling to those who "go into the ministry." A special calling is the assumed pre-requisite for ministry. This special calling seems to separate pastors and missionaries from ordinary Christians. I jokingly say that we have created a third gender in the church: there are men, women, and pastors.

Therefore it is my desire to see the call of God released from this entrapment and distortion and given back to the whole people of God. Vocation or calling is to be a servant, minister or disciple of Jesus in all spheres of life.

What therefore is the Biblical teaching on call?

Calling is a huge theme throughout the Scriptures, which we can in no way cover in one message on the subject. I want this morning to focus on one aspect of calling, that is the *purpose or heart* call. Other words for purpose or heart call are the *mission or passion* of our life.

For the sake of clarity, let me just say that purpose or heart call follows two other aspects of call that are necessary prerequisites. I will just mention them without a whole lot of explanation in the interest of time. There is first a **primary call**. Before we can even seek to know our purpose or heart call, we must respond to Christ's primary call to himself, "come and follow me", which is then to be lived out within the community of the church. This is then followed by a **secondary calling**, which is to live out our primary identity as disciples or apprentices of Jesus in all the aspects of our life, such as family, work, leisure, values, attitudes, relationships, etc. Then after getting straight our primary and secondary call, we can each seek to know our unique heart or purpose call that is the particular reason that God has placed us on this planet. It is this third aspect of call upon which I want to dwell.

Purpose or Heart Call

How do we look at the purpose or heart call? You can look at it as the *golden thread* that runs through the fabric of your life. It is the *storyline* of our life that provides a sense of continuity and coherence in our lives in an otherwise fragmented and confusing world. For example, my golden thread is a passion for the church. In particular, God has placed the burden on my heart that the church

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be released from the institutional mindset that ministry is what we pay professionals to do, and the ministry be returned to the people of God. In recent years this same passion has shifted to a heart's desire that the church recapture making disciples of Jesus as its primary focus, that I believe has been lost. This is my broken record, because it is my passion or purpose or heart call.

Our purpose or heart call is to answer the question, which we started with this morning, *"What difference would it make if you knew the purpose for which we were made?"*

If you were to listen to Jesus for his call upon your life, what characteristics of call would you consider? There are four characteristic of call that I want to consider this morning.

1. A call is focused on a need you care about. The key to a call is to get in touch with a need **we** care about. The needs in this world are endless and can be overwhelming. But what is the need that God has particularly put on our heart?

A simple way to break down these needs is to divide the needs between the church and those outside the church or the broken world.

(A) Church--If your heart is turned toward the church as the focus of your ministry, you would do well to complete the following statement, *"my greatest concern for this church is..."* What needs do you see? God has given you a particular set of eyes. We all don't see the same thing. Our hearts are wired differently. Some may have a heart for God's people to worship richly. Others are drawn to a ministry of prayer, seeing the power of God released in people's lives. Some I know carry a deep concern that God's people grow in stewardship. We constantly pray that there are people with a passion for middle school kids. Others of you see the disconnected and lonely and your heart goes out to them. Some have a voracious appetite for God's word and making it available by teaching it to others. This is the diversity of the church. The point is to ask God to help you get in touch with what your greatest concern for this church. When we are all pursuing the concerns of our hearts, especially with others who share similar concerns, powerful things happen in the body of Christ. This is how Jesus runs his church. Go to where you see the need.

(B) World—Some of us in this season of life our ministry are focused outside the church to a hurting world.

The question is, *"where does the compassion of Christ in you draw you to a hurt in this world?"*

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What the need to which your heart is drawn?

One of my heroes of history is William Wilberforce, a member of the British Parliament in the late 1700's. After his conversion to Christ he continued his aristocratic, self-centered lifestyle, until he realized his conversion had not produced a change to a higher purpose. He wrote in his journal, *"The first years I was in Parliament, I did nothing--nothing that is to any purpose. My own distinction was my darling object."* So He asked God for a purpose to make a difference. On October 28, 1787, he made this notation in his journal, *"God has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners (or morals)."* God led him to the need that he was to care about.

2. The second characteristic of a call is closely related to the first. A call has with it a feeling of a **positive burden, an inner oughtness, this I must do**. For example, the apostle Paul describes the passion of his heart to take the love of Christ to the Gentiles with these words: *"For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no grounds for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me...I am entrusted with a commission."* (I Cor. 9:16, 17) Paul is saying that carrying the gospel to the Gentiles was not something he chose to do, but he was chosen to do. This he must do. He cannot not preach the gospel to the Gentiles. This is a "have to" because God had taken hold of him. This is nothing he should receive a reward for, because he is doing just what he was made by God to do. He could no more stop preaching the gospel than to will himself to stop breathing.

Let me illustrate the passion of "this I must do" through the life of a dear friend named Hud, short for Hudson. In 1992 I was pastoring a church in Northern California. I invited Hud, who had been with me in a discipling relationship, to join with me and a few others on a mission trip to Romania under the auspices of World Vision. As you may recall after the Fall of the Romanian dictator, Coucescu, it was revealed that thousands of orphans had been warehoused in atrocious conditions.

World Vision stepped into this tragedy. Our destination was a port city on the Black Sea called Constanta. The orphanage we were to visit had the institutional name of PC3, Post Cura 3. A couple of wonderful World Vision workers were attempting to empower Romania workers to care for 35 HIV positive kids all under the age of 6. These throwaway kids had experienced the deprivation of abandonment, the prejudice of an atrociously backward hospital system, and neglect from uncaring Romanian workers who were only concerned about their pay check.

Hud was afraid to be exposed to these children. What if he allowed their needs to penetrate his heart? It might disturb his comfortable life. Having been a

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very successful commercial real estate developer, Hud was financially secure at age 45, and could spend his days pursuing his hobbies of hang gliding and golf.

However, his fear came true. As we debriefed our experience of the time at the orphanage, he broke down and sobbed over the plight of these children during prayer. From 1992 to 1996 Hud was drawn back to PC3 on an average of 2 to 3 times per year. Each time he visited, he became more aware and frustrated by the predicament of the kids. Hud recounts that on one of these trips, unable to sleep at 1:30 AM on a hot summer Romanian evening, he cried out to the Lord, "Why do you have me here?"

Shortly after that his mission was crystallized, he received his "this I must do" order. As he entered the orphanage one day, he found that the children, who were 7 and 8 years old at the time, had been shoved into in one room where a video of the movie *Platoon* was playing. There were no adult attendants anywhere. Not only were they physically and emotionally neglected, they were being exposed to outrageously inappropriate material. Throughout this visit as he looked into the eyes of the children, he could see them asking the question "Are you the one?" Are you the one who will finally help us or will you abandon us like everyone else?

The question burned in Hud's heart. He realized that there was a deep systemic problem that had to be addressed. He had to do something big and dramatic for these conditions to change. The orphanage would need to be taken from the state and placed under the leadership of capable, Christian people.

Over the next 2 years Hud formed a non-profit ministry in the US called Chi-Rho, to be the umbrella organization for this orphanage. He then used the negotiating skills that he has developed in the commercial real estate business to wrest control of the orphanage from the Romania government to bring it under this private ministry. In 1998 PC3 became Casa Viata Noua, or House of New Life. Today, Romanian Christians direct the ministry; the children live in family units of 3 to 5 children; each family is cared for by two mothers who maintain a long-term relationship with the children; the children go to school; and there are clean and attractive new facilities. The most recent addition is a state-of-the-art medical and dental clinic, that provide the children, who are now in their early teens, with the latest in care for HIV positive kids. They are living longer, in better health, and exude more joy than we had ever imagined possible.

This was accomplished by one man who responded to God's call for him. He had no training in child development, he had no background in medicine. What he did was to allow the pain of the world's brokenness to intersect a heart captured by the heart of Christ. He listened for Christ's call, "this I must do."

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With a call comes the message, *"This must be done and you are the one who has been called to do it."*

3. But as soon as you allow that thought to enter your spirit, there is a third characteristic of call that says, *"This is bigger than I can ever accomplish in my own resources."* There is nothing worthy of the name call that does not have enormous obstacles connected to it and toward which we say, *"Who me, Lord? You have got to be kidding?"*

Isn't this the question Moses asked when he received his call from God? For 40 years Moses had languished quietly in the wilderness tending to his flock after having fled from the Pharaoh's house. The Lord informed Moses that he has heard the cries of oppression from his people under their taskmasters in Egypt, and now He had come to deliver them. Moses, probably thought, *"Why are you telling me this?"* He didn't have to wait long for the answer, *"Moses, guess how I am going to deliver my people?" "I will send you to Pharaoh."* But Moses evidenced the typical reaction to a call from God. *"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?"* I am frankly comforted by that response. Wouldn't you be more than a bit suspicious if Moses had responded by saying, *"No problem, Lord. What took you so long? I have known that I have been the guy for the job."*

The call of God brings us to the end of our resources so that we must throw ourselves upon the Lord and find other companions who share the mission. Let me return to the story of William Wilberforce and his call to end slavery in the British Empire. John Wesley's last letter just 6 days before his death at the age of 88 was to Wilberforce. *"My dear sir, Unless The Divine Power has raised you up, I see not how you can go through with your glorious enterprise in opposing that execrable villainy which is the scandal of religion. Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils; but if God is with you, who can be against you?"* Wilberforce was not alone. There was a group of like minded people who sustained each other in this 40 year battle known as the *Clapham Society*. They sacrificed their resources; they met regularly together for prayer and strategy sessions to bring down this institution of evil. As God would have it, the day in 1832 when slavery was abolished throughout the British Empire was the day of Wilberforce's last breath. A colleague wrote, *"It is a singular fact that on the very night on which we were successfully engaged in passing the Act of Emancipation...the spirit of our friend left the world. The day which was the termination of his labors was the termination of his life."*

4. Finally, the last characteristic of a call is that there is **energy and joy** that wells up in you when you apply your gifts to a need that you care about. In John 15, Jesus calls us to abide in him as a branch abides in the vine. If we are to bear fruit, which is the goal of our life, then we must remain attached to the

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vine. Jesus concludes this section by saying, *"These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full."* (John 15:11) What was Jesus' joy? Jesus found his greatest joy in doing the will of the Father. When Jesus hung on the cross giving his life for you and me, he uttered. *"It is finished."* He had completed what His Father has set before. How could this be? Only a few people in an inconsequential land had any idea what this meant. Yet the work the Father had assigned him was done. Jesus told his disciples, when they were concerned that he had skipped a meal, *"My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work."* (John 4:34) In accomplishing what was set before him to do, then there was the deepest sense of satisfaction and well being. It says in Hebrews 12:2, *"For the joy that was set before him, He endured the cross."*

What does Jesus want for us? We would have the same joy that he had and that our joy would well up full to overflowing. When we operate in our call there is a release of energy. You are at the heart of what you were made for. When we operate in our call and in the context of our call we tap into an energy that flow and says, *"I am made for this."*

In summary, the call of God is focused on a need you care about, comes with "this I must do", is bigger than we can do on our own, and releases energy and joy like a refreshing stream.

It is this purpose or heart call that all of God's people need to know is available to them. I pray for the day that all of God's people will be able to live the truth that Gordon Cosby describes, *"Vocation or calling has the elements of knowing that if you respond to the call, you are faithful to your own inner being and you are enhanced by it. Your own awareness converges with some need out yonder and intersects with it in such a way that you have the sense that you were born to this."*